

The Guiding Tradition at Gettysburg

By Fred Hawthorne, LBG #56

Guiding on the Gettysburg battlefield has a longstanding tradition. Almost as soon as the armies pulled away in July 1863, shocked local citizens were called on to conduct a variety of grieving family members and confused visitors around the area. The first individual to emerge in the post-war period to act as a professional guide was a former Union soldier, Sergeant William David Holtzworth.

Holtzworth became the prototype battlefield guide of the era. Part owner of a Gettysburg livery company, he and his fellow hackmen played a key role in providing the transportation and narration for a variety of post-war visits of veterans of all ranks from both armies. During the monumentation era of the 1870s and 1880s, livery hackmen, day laborers working with construction crews and other Gettysburg citizens who had experienced the terrors of battle became sources of valuable information for returning veterans and non-veteran visitors alike. Veteran reunions and monument dedications – and the stories told therein – added to the body of guide lore.

The spring 1884 completion of the Gettysburg and Harrisburg Railroad and the 1894 building of the Gettysburg Electric Railroad economically made it possible for thousands to travel to and around the field – providing another great boon to guiding. Others jumped on the opportunity, joining nationally prominent individuals already guiding, such as Luther W. Minnigh and Capt. James T. Long. By the late 19th century, about 50 individuals made all or a substantial part of their living from guiding; those who wanted to guide, did. This unregulated approach to guiding led to concerns about quality and consistency in practice, such as not covering all battlefield sites during a tour.

The establishment of the Gettysburg National Park Commission by the U.S. War Department led to the first written evidence of the requirement that anyone intending to conduct tours of the field had to receive authorization to do so by the commissioners. Dated 1895, the commission's first published regulations stated this in rule #1. No one could conduct tours without this authorization; the commission established fees for such tours that could not be exceeded. This represents the first true step toward the development of the licensing process. (*Regulations for the Government of the Gettysburg National Park*, Gettysburg PA 1895 – Rule #1)

Despite granting this early authority to regulate guiding at the Park, the War Department and its commission in the late 19th and early 20th centuries focused more on the myriad projects designed to improve the Park itself – including developing the Confederate army's lines, building and improving the Park's road system and improving the visitor infrastructure. Activities of local guides were not a priority.

The passing or retirement of the first true guides – as well as the advent of the automobile and subsequent decline of the livery system (which required hackmen to obtain a \$10 borough

license to operate) – led to the entry of unqualified individuals guiding at the Park such that complaints of guide quality and shoddy solicitation practices began to pour into the offices of the commission. By the time of the 50th Battle Anniversary in 1913, an estimated 100 men and boys were actively guiding. To stem the flood of complaints, Park Commissioner and battle veteran John Page Nicholson, working with the Assistant Secretary of War Henry S. Breckinridge, developed a procedure requiring the passing of a written examination. This was considered an absolute prerequisite of obtaining authorization, or “a license,” to practice guiding on the battlefield of Gettysburg.

The goal of Nicholson’s licensing procedure: to protect the public and those eminently qualified to be guides by refusing to license anyone obviously unfit and by revoking the license of those who failed to perform or did not comply with guiding regulations. Throughout September and October 1915, 91 individuals sat for this new written examination. Some proved their qualifications and scored high enough to earn what were called first-class licenses. Others, scoring less than a set percentage, were granted second- and third-class licenses but were required to complete additional study under the auspices of a “Guide School” and retake the exam to earn an acceptable score.

The era of modern guiding officially began October 17, 1915. The courts upheld the newly enhanced War Department regulations when unlicensed individuals were arrested for conducting tours of the battlefield after that date. As a direct result, the quality of guide services improved.

Newly licensed battlefield guides (LBGs) were issued an official nine-pointed guide badge as evidence of their new status. Fees were formalized at \$3 for a basic tour of the battlefield and shortly afterward, a group of guides led by J. Warren Gilbert requested the adoption of a formal uniform for the new LBGs. On October 24 the following year, the Battlefield Guide Association was established to serve as the guides’ official representative in dealing with both the Park commission and Gettysburg Borough authorities. Its name was changed to Association of Licensed Battlefield Guides in the early 1980s and today enjoys its status as the oldest professional guide organization in the United States.

From 1915 to the onset of the Great Depression, the Gettysburg LBGs continued as the visitor’s sole source of interpretation on the Gettysburg battlefield. Exams were held periodically to license guide replacements for those who passed away or simply gave up the profession for more stable income. The War Department appointed a “guide supervisor,” William Storrick, to oversee these newly licensed individuals. Guide methods of tour solicitation at various locations in the town became somewhat of a challenge. Lincoln Square was a hotbed of activity for a majority of the guides, although hotels and certain key outposts around town also were regular places of acquiring tours. At each of these posts a method of sharing the tours called “striking” was adopted formally by the guides themselves to bring about a degree of order to the solicitation process.

Two changes came to guiding in 1929: the last exam administered under the auspices of the War Department and the retirement of the original guide uniform in favor of a more modern military one in khaki. Park Superintendent E.E. Davis also retired the guide badge in this period, halting

its use by some as a means of stopping visitors via the flashing of the badge in the manner of a policeman. A numbered wreath cap badge replaced it.

A low point in licensed guiding began in 1930. The onset of the Great Depression in fall 1929 quickly led to a sharp drop-off of visitation. In an attempt to entice visitors to hire guides, a “twister” or short, one-hour tour at a reduced price was adopted. This tour survived into the mid-1960s. Fewer visitors meant less business for guides. Consequently, no new guide exams were offered and no new guides were licensed for many years – resulting in a slow decrease in the number of guides.

President Franklin Roosevelt issued an executive order August 10, 1933, transferring the War Department military parks like Gettysburg to the young National Park Service (NPS). In existence less than 20 years, NPS leaders inherited a system they neither understood nor wished to control, leaving the Gettysburg guide system somewhat adrift.

Even though less than 40 guides remained working by the early 1940s, the NPS began making changes affecting the tour experience. The opening of visitor contact facilities in the spring of 1937 (the West End and South End stations) initially staffed by Park “Ranger-Historians” was an attempt to control the solicitation practices of the few remaining guides. Guides also viewed the implementation of a self-guided auto tour route the year before as a direct attack on their business.

Perhaps in an attempt to settle guide fears that the NPS planned to eliminate LBGs, the Park superintendent announced that Park Historian Dr. Frederick Tilberg would be offering a required 12-part training session in 1942 followed by a mandatory retesting of all existing guides. Clearly an effort to ensure the quality of guides, this move allayed current guides’ fears of elimination. A soon-to-follow Park attempt to place remaining guides on the Civil Service as paid employees did not meet with the same success, as guides overwhelmingly voted to remain independent.

The post-war period saw the NPS firmly committed to the continuation of the long-entrenched private guide service. A rapid increase in visitation led to the realization that the guide force was woefully small with perhaps no more than half the number working than had been licensed in 1929. On August 15, 1951, the first NPS guide examination was administered purely for the purpose of adding new guides to the Park roster. These new candidates also faced a new challenge and requirement of a partial oral exam in the presence of Dr. Tilberg. Compensation also improved with the first increase in authorized guide fees from the original \$3 per tour price in effect since the turn of the century. Concerted efforts to improve quality – as well as increase quantity – of guides continued. In 1957, Park historians Dr. Tilberg and Dr. Harry Pfanz and Col. Jacob Sheads – an educator, Park ranger-historian and LBG – organized a group called the Gettysburg Civil War Roundtable to give LBGs a broader knowledge of the entire war period. Though initial Park efforts were aimed at creating lists of qualified candidates to maintain an active guide list of 55, the next three decades saw the steady increase of guides up to nearly 100 with guide exams again offered on a more regular basis.

The 1962 opening of the Park's first true Visitor Center, the Richard Neutra-designed "Cyclorama Building," led the NPS to begin to encourage guides to work there as the primary location for tour distribution. At the same time, some of the guide stations around town – the North End, South End and East Cemetery Hill stations – were declared closed. Although up through the mid- to late 1980s, some guides were permitted to continue soliciting their own tours from outlying sites – including Lincoln Square and the West End station – the process of centralizing guides continued. By 1975, all newly licensed guides were informed they could work only out of the Visitor Center.

Despite the changes in solicitation methods and where guides picked up tours, one thing had held constant – licensed guiding was an exclusively male tradition. Even NPS Superintendent J. Walter Coleman had publicly stated "... licenses were to be restricted to men" when reintroducing the guide exam in 1951. This changed in spring 1968, however, when Park policy was relaxed and Barbara Schutt applied for and then passed the guide exam, becoming the first female LBG. A few years later, Supervisory National Park Technician Nora Saum was appointed guide supervisor, a post she held until her retirement in 1980. During her tenure, the requirement for a full oral-examination tour of the battlefield was implemented. Although guiding remains primarily a male profession, nearly 40 other women have earned guide licenses since Schutt donned the guide uniform.

In 1972, the NPS purchased the National Museum and Electric Map from the Rosensteel family. This building then became the Park's Visitor Center and the headquarters for the licensed battlefield guides. During the nation's Bicentennial in 1976, the LBG uniform changed again, this time to the blue/gray uniform still in place today. As part of the 75th anniversary commemoration of licensed guiding in 1990, the guide badge was reintroduced. That same year, the PBS/Ken Burns documentary series on the American Civil War – coupled with the release of the Ron Maxwell movie *Gettysburg* shortly thereafter in 1993 – led to a spike in visitation and the increase of the guide force to more than 140. In 1995 alone, 30 individuals were tested and licensed – the most guides licensed in a single year.

Today, there are almost 160 licensed battlefield guides still working under the direct supervision of the National Park Service. It remains the only professional guide service to be tested and licensed by the NPS under regulations set down in the *Code of Federal Regulations Title 36, Chapter 1, Part 25*. Two other Civil War parks allow guides to operate, although they are not licensed by the NPS, but instead licensed or certified under the auspices of affiliated agencies. Guides at Vicksburg National Military Park are licensed by the local Convention and Visitors Bureau. Guides at Antietam National Battlefield are certified by the Western Maryland Interpretive Association.

Modern battlefield guides are required to be completely familiar with all Park rules and regulations and are to ensure that their clients comply with such regulations. Guides are not salaried but receive a fee for each tour completed based on the length of the tour. The basic tour still consists of two hours as it has for more than 100 years, but additional hours may be added at the request of the visitor. All fees are established by the superintendent of Gettysburg National Military Park and a guide may not charge any more or less. Currently, fees are based on the

number of people a vehicle can safely hold. Since 1916, Gettysburg guides have been a uniformed service and this uniform, though prescribed by the NPS, must be provided at the guide's own expense.

To ensure an adequate force of guides to serve the visiting public, the National Park Service periodically administers written and oral examinations, licensing new guides as needed. Today, the licensed battlefield guides still retain the motto established in 1915 by their predecessors: "A Good Battlefield Trip is the Best Advertisement for Gettysburg."

Reference: "*A Peculiar Institution*" *The History of the Licensed Battlefield Guides* by Frederick W. Hawthorne, 1990